

Reflective insights into teaching and learning from the AEDiL project

Collaborative autoethnographic stories of higher education realities during Corona

In March 2020, a group of higher education professionals and researchers launched a collaboration in an autoethnographic research project. Their aim: to collect, discuss and jointly reflect upon their experiences during the time of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in Germany. This chapter introduces the context of the project and offers insights into the diverse autoethnographic stories of its members. In the stories, the project members – some academic teaching staff, some educational developers or technologists – describe their (new) daily routines, the barriers they faced, and the solutions they found as they were trying to cope with the demands of working from home, under the conditions of social distancing, and doing so via online tools. Through the multiple realities presented in these stories, they offer unique insights into the effects of the pandemic on Higher Education Institutions in Germany. In addition to the importance of reflecting on one's own experience, the stories shed light on aspects that helped people in higher education to cope with the challenges of teaching and learning during a crisis: openness and collaboration.

Introduction

Working in academia certainly has its moments. To be a member of a research project such as AEDiL definitely falls under this category. AEDiL is a German acronym and the name of a project which deals with autoethnographic research on technology-enhanced teaching and its development (*AutoEthnographische Forschung zu Digitaler Lehre und deren Begleitung*). This is a project which – unlike many others – was not forced to find a way to transfer its routines during the pandemic, but which aimed at researching the challenges that emerged due to the new ‘working from home’ reality with which most of us have been confronted since early 2020.

As unexpected and unforeseeable as this project was when it came into being, it quickly became an important part of our weekly routine. Why? Because of the research method that we used to approach and analyse the experiences which Higher Education Institutions (HEI) were encountering due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography¹, in fact. This was an approach which provided us with the scientific tools to collect data on how we as individuals perceived the social phenomena of academic teaching and learning during a pandemic. Based on

¹ Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography*; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, *Autoethnography: An Overview*; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, *Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research*.

self-observation and reflective field notes, which we shared and discussed with our research colleagues in AEDiL, we not only encountered diverse perspectives on teaching and learning, we also – and perhaps most crucially – encountered ourselves. In AEDiL, we transferred individual experiences into collective topics, shifted our perceptions and fostered deeper reflective understanding of *why* and *how* the sensation of emergency remote teaching² challenged us and our educational partners³. We became a community of practice⁴, learning from our shared experiences as autoethnographic researchers. These were experiences which resulted in 15 autoethnographic stories and this book on our collaborative journey as a research group. But who exactly are we? The next paragraph sheds light on this question.

Today, the AEDiL group consists of 16 people with different academic backgrounds who work in diverse fields within the German higher education system. Higher education researcher, educational developer, educational technologists, all involved in teaching, all valuing peer feedback and collaboration, particularly, but not exclusively, regarding the use of technology. Fittingly, the AEDiL project arose from a discussion on *Twitter*.⁵ At the end of March 2020, six people – who later constituted the AEDiL core group – decided to launch the autoethnographic project, quickly developing a call for participation which would soon be distributed across the network of related disciplinary associations. On April 2nd 2020, the core group and interested members of the community had their first meeting. After this initial meeting of 20 people, our group initiated relevant preparations to begin our work as collaborative autoethnographers.

As our work was led by autoethnography as a method, we collected data drawn from our individual experiences, perceptions and emotions during the (beginning of) the pandemic. Self-observation and reflective documentation marked our research actions, as individuals, between April and July 2020. It also marked our collaboration as members of AEDiL. Although all ethnographic research projects rely on a certain amount of collaboration⁶, collaborative autoethnography combines the insights and data of various autoethnographic researchers.⁷ Often this is done by connecting single autoethnographic stories to emphasise individual, sometimes contrasting perspectives, or by collaboratively analysing the collected material.⁸ In AEDiL we used a more complex approach. Collaboration marked our work throughout the whole research process: we shared our individual research interests and discussed similarities and

2 Fleischmann, “Emergency Remote Teaching. Pragmatische Ansätze zur Transformation von Präsenzlehre zu Onlinelehre”; Hodges et al., “The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning”; also Rapanta et al., “Online university teaching during and after the Covid-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity”.

3 Some of us worked with students in seminars, lectures or thesis projects, and others with academics in workshops, qualification programmes or consultations; the term ‘educational partners’ expresses best our shared understanding of the people we address in our professional life.

4 Wenger, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*.

5 On March 26th 2020 Isabel Steinhardt posted a tweet in which she asked who would be interested in joining her as autoethnographic researchers; <https://twitter.com/sozmethode/status/1243082339422539776>.

6 Campbell, and Lassiter, *Doing ethnography today: Theoretical issues and pragmatic concerns*; Culhane, “Imagining: An introduction”.

7 Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, *Collaborative Autoethnography*; Chang, “Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method”.

8 E. g. Czerniewicz, et al., “A Wake-Up Call: Equity, Inequality and Covid-19 Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning”.

differences, we shared our fieldnotes and reflective thoughts and gathered reflective impulses through the notes of others, we used our colleagues' perspectives to identify the core elements in our material and developed frames for our individual collaborative stories, and finally we designed book chapters to frame our work, losing track of who suggested which argument or wrote a specific sentence. The book, in which this chapter is published, bears witness to the collaborative quality that powered our research. After less than a year, AEDiL managed to launch a working, multi-layered research project which developed findings, themselves well worth sharing with all those who wished to join us in (re)thinking higher education teaching and learning paradigms.

This chapter offers a concise introduction to the academic context of the AEDiL project. Further, it yields insights into the single autoethnographic stories that emerged during our research and thereby provides a deeper understanding as to how agents in the German higher education system experienced teaching and learning during the (first) so-called 'Corona semester' in 2020. Finally, this chapter highlights the challenges and creative approaches of dealing with the demands of working under social distancing requirements and reflects how a collaborative research project such as this worked under these conditions. As members of this project, we certainly agree that for the past ten months, it has seemed as though we are part of something special and in this chapter, we will provide arguments to understand 'why'.

First things first: getting familiar with the context of AEDiL

The rapid and unavoidable shift towards emergency remote research, teaching and learning hit Germany as unexpectedly as it did the vast majority of European higher education institutions (HEI). While digitally based learning and teaching have generally acquired growing interest from policy-makers across Europe in the recent decade, the actual practical and strategic implementation for equivalent concepts varied broadly between and within tertiary institutions by country, size and resources.⁹ Broadly speaking, the advent of the Covid-19 outbreak in spring 2020 caught the German higher education system particularly unprepared in comparison to other Western countries. The pandemic outbreak illuminated the fact that digital forms of teaching and learning were not yet fully implemented across departments and study programmes. The autoethnographic stories within the AEDiL project therefore need to be understood against the backdrop of these preconditions and contexts.

In recent years, German HEI have been a long way from adopting systemic and strategic approaches for digital teaching and learning scenarios.¹⁰ While digital technologies, such as lecture slides and literature provision, already played a major role in the private communication behaviour of students and were used for basic auxiliary university services; more complex and demanding forms of technology-enhanced

⁹ EUA, *European higher education in the Covid-19 crisis*.

¹⁰ Dräger et al., "Higher Education Institutions Need Strategies for the Digital Age".

learning and teaching, such as video conferencing, learning management system usage and blended learning, were implemented only occasionally.¹¹ Positive examples of technology-enhanced academic teaching and learning at German higher education institutions refer mainly back to individual instructor or faculty engagement. Even more symbolically, by the year 2019, only 14 percent of German HEI had a digitalisation strategy in place.¹² While the digitalisation of teaching and learning was a high priority for almost a third of German universities at this time, only 1.7 percent of German universities rated the state of digitalisation of teaching and learning as ‘very advanced’.¹³ Kerres¹⁴ summarised the way the German higher education system entered the summer term¹⁵ of 2020 as follows: “No managerial strategies, no teacher training, no debates on technological design or politics, no arguments about the pros and cons – we just do it.” How did it come to pass that Germany, as a leading high-tech industrial nation in the heart of Europe, struggled to switch to digitally enhanced emergency remote teaching and learning in the summer and autumn of 2020?

Prior to the pandemic shock, political efforts were certainly being made to push for more digital technologies to be implemented in academic teaching and learning in Germany. Political funding schemes date back to the year 2000, when funds were invested by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in(to) the major funding programme “New Media in Education”. A total volume of 185 million Euros was invested with the goal to broadly integrate new media in education. In recent years (2014–2017), the German federal government launched its Digital Agenda including an “Education Offensive for the Digital Knowledge Society”, followed by a digitalisation strategy published by the BMBF in 2016¹⁶ and additional initiatives at the state (Länder) level. In parallel to the year 2014 onwards, the Federal Ministry also established the Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (HFD) as a central platform to inform, advise and network with actors from universities, politics, business and society. On advising several German universities and collecting examples of good practice, experts from the think-tank sum up the state of digital education in 2018 as follows¹⁷: “German universities are using digitalization primarily to modernize their teaching methods and curricula. Traditional paradigms of teaching, examination and certification are rarely questioned.”

Alongside the trend of political support and enforcement of new technology integration in academic education in Germany, there has been a widely-shared criticism of digitalisation in general and digital media integration in education specifically. Grounded in its historic experiences with state-led surveillance in the past, Germany has

11 Skulmowski, and Rey, “COVID-19 as an Accelerator for Digitalization at a German University: Establishing Hybrid Campuses in Times of Crisis”.

12 EFI, *Gutachten zu Forschung, Innovation und technologischer Leistungsfähigkeit Deutschlands 2019*.

13 Gilch et al., „Digitalisierung der Hochschulen – Ergebnisse einer Schwerpunktstudie für die Expertenkommission Forschung und Innovation“.

14 Kerres, “Against All Odds”, 1.

15 In Germany, most HEI organise their academic year in two semesters, summer term (April to September) and winter term (October to March).

16 Zawacki-Richter, “The Current State and Impact of Covid-19 on Digital Higher Education in Germany”.

17 Translated by Zawacki-Richter.

possibly the strictest privacy and information protection legislation in Europe.¹⁸ Further, and connected to this argument, there is great scepticism among the population and policy-makers about the integration of commercial solutions in (higher) education contexts. German universities have mainly relied on and still rely on self-hosted open-source solutions for learning management systems (e.g. *Moodle*) or video conference systems (e.g. *BigBlueButton*). In consequence, while hastening to design and implement remote formats in their teaching and learning contexts in 2020, German HEIs were thrown off their guard by the fact that many of the video conference tools and learning management systems (LMS) in place were not suitable for more than 25 students.¹⁹ Typically, and even more symbolically, at medium-sized German universities with 15,000 students, the video conferencing system failed in March and April 2020, when only university staff switched to working remotely in home offices.²⁰

It is not only modes of teaching and learning which have been brought into question by the Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic aggravated the structural issues that had shaped the German academic landscape long before the health crisis and caused numerous debates, still without substantial improvement to date. First, the weighting factor of diverse tasks natural for the academic profession – research, teaching and academic self-administration – disclosed a clear imbalance. The scientific ideal, the unity of research and teaching, was found to be in serious trouble due to the long-term prioritisation of key figures of excellence rooted in research. Scientific output, measured by the number of scientific publications and acquisition of third-party funds, which mirror the quantity of results rather than their quality, came to the forefront of academic excellence within the reformation strategy in the early 2010s. Under these conditions, teaching often appeared as an annoying side effect of the academic profession for those who target tenured positions. The latter depend solely on research performance – research and publication activities. Scholars, especially non-tenured, were challenged not only by the realisation of digital teaching, but much more by their personal and organisational handling of the Coronavirus crisis, trying to balance a number of tasks simultaneously.

A second issue, inherently interwoven with the first, is that of gender equality and social justice in academia. German scientific institutions are gendered organisations²¹ known for their conservative culture and promotion criteria that inevitably favour men over women. The German academic ideal of an ever-available productive scholar is deeply anchored in organisational norms, making otherness an obstacle to promotion. This is especially true for minorities in academia, such as women or individuals with migration backgrounds.²² Organisational policies had insufficiently targeted inequalities in German HEI before the pandemic, an imbalance exacerbated even further during the measures such as lockdowns implemented to combat the pandemic. Flexible

18 Kerres, "Against All Odds".

19 Kerres, 1.

20 Zawacki-Richter, "The Current State and Impact of Covid-19 on Digital Higher Education in Germany".

21 Acker, *Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations*; Britton, "Beyond the Chilly Climate: The Salience of Gender in Women's Academic Careers".

22 Gewinner, "Work-life balance for native and migrant scholars in German academia: meanings and practices"; Straub, and Boncori, "Foreign women in academia: Double-strangers between productivity, marginalization and resistance".

working in a home office became a challenge for parents and those who are involved in caregiving tasks. In academia this (still) applies to women in particular who are still considered to be the main caregivers in German society, placing them in the disadvantageous position of coping with the pandemic by making decisions that would affect their careers.

Our research reflects on the developments described and the German academic context at the starting point of the response to the pandemic by applying an autoethnographic method. It shows how personal challenges mirror organisational and even political issues, and discloses the problems deeply ingrained in academic culture. All stories presented in the following need to be understood in the light of this German-specific context.

From opportunities to tensions: AEDiL's autoethnographic stories

The autoethnographic stories created within AEDiL mirror how complex and diverse we as HEI researchers and professionals were as we perceived and handled our daily (digital) routines. These stories, despite their varying contexts and individual cores, offer findings on four key issues related to the unexpected shift to online teaching and learning settings and to the challenges of continued work in a time of crisis. Based on these shared perspectives, we named four content-related story clusters:

- Opportunities in the crisis
- New (digital) teaching practices
- Expectation discrepancies
- Structural tensions

Each story cluster will be shortly introduced in the following; highlighting the outcomes of our collective reflective processes.

The first story cluster addresses *Opportunities in the crisis*, and seeks to demonstrate how unexpected changes and related feelings of insecurity might provoke new lines of thinking. Whether related to one's own academic identity or professional context, being uncertain of how to act can foster the emergence of alternative patterns of behaviour, not necessarily to the detriment of the actor. For instance, one story describes how insecurity within a classroom supported a teacher to better connect with his students and to jointly fathom ways to re-design their interaction in the hitherto unknown online context. The next story emphasises the importance of reflective thinking in overcoming concerns and fears that emerged during the first weeks of the 'Corona semester'. Here, the author describes the negotiation processes which helped him to find solutions in his daily work. A third story addresses the topic of uncertainty, in which an educational developer started to notice uncertainty as an inherent part of her professional field. Following the beginning of the pandemic and the new degree of insecurity, she was able to re-conceptualise this insecurity as a productive element of

her particular professional field. Finally, one of the stories in this field documents and reflects upon why the physically demanding working context, with which all members of the higher education systems had to cope, could foster the awareness of how being healthy is a relevant topic when it comes to teaching and learning in general.

Stories which are gathered in the cluster named *New (digital) teaching practices* address the question of how our teaching practices change(d) due to the new working conditions caused by Covid-19. By observing and reflecting upon their own actions as teachers, some AEDiL members captured how and why their teaching practices changed. To develop new practices, our stories emphasise that three aspects are needed: first, a trigger, often a situation in which one's daily routines are being challenged and will simply not work as planned (anymore); second, recurring reflective action, to critically review former practices as well as the trigger which made them obsolete; and third, one needs time! Without enough time and motivation to actually document and reflect these changing teaching practices, it will be much harder to overcome old routines and establish new ones. For instance, one story argues that – however elaborated – one's abstract and theoretical knowledge needs careful reflection to be adequately applied in practice. Other stories describe how shifting teaching modes enables us as teachers to gain a new awareness of our students' needs or of our own dependence on their involvement. These stories reflect how increased awareness may lead to (more) learner-oriented teaching practices. And sometimes, as one more story in this cluster highlights, these new teaching practices involve a changed perception of one's own role as teacher and how in virtual teaching settings it might shift, as described in this case, towards the role of a coach.

The stories in the cluster on new (digital) teaching practices already indicate the significance of expectations in academic teaching contexts. Expectations can shape our teaching and learning practices whilst remaining hidden from those who are learning/teaching/working with us.²³ The implicit knowledge²⁴ related to such hidden expectations cannot easily be described and often – especially in contexts in which a group applies the same set of implicit rules – there is no need to be more explicit. However, this need emerges, when we act in unknown contexts in which new rules, new practices and, in consequence, new expectations arise. During the pandemic and caused by the ad hoc transfer of teaching and learning into virtual settings, those involved had to develop new practices which sometimes involved specific expectations about how to (inter)act. Referring to this, four stories deal with *Expectation discrepancies*. The first story in this cluster stresses how being a member of the broader academic field, which researches and designs technology-enhanced learning (TEL) contexts, had caused feelings of self-doubt and internal resistance related to the increased interest in online teaching during the early stages of the pandemic. This story reveals that the growth of experiences of teaching in virtual settings provoked a critical reflection of formerly approved concepts, which in the current situation seemed to have lost their relevance. The real-life experiences in teaching during the first 'Corona semes-

23 Thielsch, "Approaching the Invisible: Hidden Curriculum and Implicit Expectations in Higher Education".

24 Polanyi, *Implizites Wissen*.

ter', although pushing the importance of digital competencies, also led to critical re-evaluation of how to work meaningfully as a TEL expert in higher education. Such re-evaluation also lies at the centre of the second story in which an academic teacher and online teaching enthusiast finds herself confronted with the not so enthusiastic reaction of her students to the new mode of teaching. Balancing their own expectations and allowing for more responsibilities on the side of the learners proved to be strategies which were effective at overcoming contradictory expectations. Another story in this cluster discusses how the 'Corona semester', most notably, shed light on the limited experiences that people in HEIs still have when it comes to dealing with online tools and settings. The lack of experience, this story argues, may lead to differing perceptions (and ad hoc applications) of the opportunities offered by digital media. The last story in this cluster uses an educational development perspective to collect and reflect experiences of teachers and students. The narrator argues that most of the obstacles in unknown teaching settings, just as the rapid shift to virtual classrooms, can derive from the diverse (and often hidden) expectations of those involved. As the story illustrates, the majority of these expectations can be linked to social involvement (or the lack thereof) in class.

The fourth cluster addresses *Structural tensions*. The stories in this subsection demonstrate how acute yet silent these tensions had been prior to the pandemic, and the extent to which they showed themselves and their severity during and after the lockdown in spring 2020. These tensions are a regular topic of internal conversations and academic publications, and have not yet been adequately answered, whether at organisational or policy level. The first story problematises the value of teaching in higher education from the perspective of a non-tenured scholar. This particular constellation discloses the issues of securing a permanent position through the sharpening of one's own scientific profile in terms of publications and third-party funds, against the background of achieving simultaneous obligatory teaching. Another story sheds light on these experiences from the perspective of a professor, a tenured academic with substantial management and administrative obligations. This story echoes the first and shows that tenure adds substantially to the tensions experienced in academic contexts. It depicts how teaching might lose even more external recognition, while other functions take priority. Teaching, in consequence, becomes a 'side issue'. In order to cope with the added plurality of tasks and obligations, work in the evenings and weekends becomes normal. The latter circumstance is addressed in the story that focuses on the issues of gender inequalities and social justice within German academia. Due to organisational policies and cultures, the story shows that women remain disadvantaged when it comes to the evaluation of their scientific output, since it is often merely compared to that of men. Thus, they need to work harder, which can be difficult with regard to private responsibilities, such as family. Reflecting policy recommendations from research papers and her own experience, the author of this story argues that the home office is not necessarily a solution for the reconciliation of work and home duties for women; for policies target families, not women.

Together, all of the stories that emerged during the AEDiL project (to date) provide unique insights into the experiences of HEI agents; experiences that are grounded in individual and specific academic contexts. By offering these insights, the stories expose the complex web of (institutional) aspects that influence our daily (teaching and learning) practices in academia. At the same time, they emphasise the immense range of individual approaches that can be found to address the challenges of being an academic teacher.

Why it worked: Openness and collaboration as key

Whether mirrored by the diverse autoethnographic stories that evolved within the project or by the way in which the project itself came into existence, there are two overarching features that facilitated the success of AEDiL: the wish to value openness and the wish to foster collaboration. Both offered an opportunity for this bottom-up project to grow and prosper despite (or because of?) the Coronavirus pandemic, and both enabled collaborative research method such as autoethnography, which rests upon reflection, to create the scientific outcome presented here. In the following section, we will introduce six strategies, which were applied in AEDiL to foster collaboration and to provide a safe environment for its members to enter into joint reflective processes.²⁵ In fact, these strategies can be seen to be the result of reflection on another level: the level of project management. By elaborating on these strategies, we seek to make transparent how and why a collaborative autoethnography project like ours worked.

Strategy 1: Foster interaction: Although autoethnography puts self-observation at the centre of research, collaborative autoethnography relies on intense discussions and exchange of ideas among group members. As well as sharing field notes in the secure space of the *Mahara* platform, and reading and commenting on the reflective text of others, interaction was fostered on various levels in AEDiL. We established *regular meetings* to discuss and clarify organisational aspects; the core-group met weekly, the entire group once per month. Additionally, content-related meetings helped to complement verbal interaction to the otherwise written exchange. During the first part of the summer term (until July 2020), the entire group was invited to join in optional reflective meetings (facilitated by one member of the core-group) to discuss recent experiences. During the second part (between August and October 2020), the entire group was divided into writing groups in order to collaboratively identify the focus and red thread in each individual autoethnographic story.

Strategy 2: Share responsibility: Since working in AEDiL was based on individual autoethnographic research, responsibility within the project was naturally distributed. However, due to the fact that AEDiL applied a collaborative approach, each member was invited to feel responsible for further additional tasks. From the beginning this

²⁵ Initially, these strategies were introduced within a blog post in December 2020; Autor:innengruppe AEDiL, „Kollegiale Lernräume als Stütze im digitalen Semester – Eindrücke aus dem Projekt AEDiL“.

was implemented through the project structure: one person was appointed project leader, taking responsibility for maintaining communication between all members (e. g. by weekly status emails). Six people formed the core-group mentioned earlier, which met every week and discussed the progress of the project. Whenever small group activities (such as writing groups or reflective meetings) were implemented, one person of this core-group participated, thus being able to further establish transparency between the discussions, thoughts and possible needs of each member and the core-croup. Similar to this *organisational responsibility*, which centred on the members of the core-group, the *content-related responsibility* while collaboratively writing this book was structured. Each chapter was initially created by a small group of people. Whilst some carried out the actual writing, others took on the roles of critical friends, offering feedback and editing text. The mixture of having fixed responsibilities as researchers, of being able to take on additional responsibility, and (maybe most importantly) of being open to actually get involved as project members facilitated and enabled the collaborative principles behind AEDiL.

Strategy 3: Be sympathetic: AEDiL emerged at a time in which additional tasks were not easy to handle. However, the project members decided to be involved and to invest time and dedication, because of the benefits that a peer learning project like AEDiL could offer in return, e. g., meeting like-minded colleagues, sharing individual challenges and feeling reassured that others also tend to stumble in similar situations. Despite such motivating aspects, being involved in a project like AEDiL required integration with corresponding tasks in each member's 'actual' daily work. This led, from time to time, to situations in which tasks could not be completed on time. Here, sympathy was key. Remembering that AEDiL only exists because of the crisis, which each of the group's members had to deal with, and that a key hope behind the project was to better understand *when* and *why* things don't work in higher education, why people feel left alone with their tasks and how collegial support can help in such situations, was crucial to developing and maintaining sympathy.

Strategy 4: Ensure confidentiality: Since every member of the AEDiL group needed to feel safe while sharing their experiences, thoughts, and even fears, confidentiality was a relevant issue. To establish trust within the group from the beginning, several steps were taken. Their aim: on the one hand, to increase a sense of community, and on the other hand, to offer transparency regarding work structure. For the latter, a *code of conduct* was developed to clarify how extracts or examples of another person's field notes could (or could not) be used. This code of conduct was discussed and published on the group's *ResearchGate*²⁶ page, thereby ensuring its official status. Regarding the sense of community, the first meetings as well as the kick-off on the *Mahara* platform focused on getting to know each other. Each member introduced his/her professional context and research focus to the others in initial blog posts, thus illuminating the variety of perspectives and interests. In addition, individual questions, needs and worries, which had emerged during the first weeks of the pandemic and which had moti-

²⁶ The project can be found under the German name „AEDiL - AutoEthnographische Forschung zu digitaler Lehre und deren Begleitung“ on *ResearchGate*.

vated each member to join AEDiL, were collected in the group's first video conference meeting. The invitation to share experiences from the beginning emphasised that collaborating in an autoethnographic research project such as ours has to be grounded in confidentiality. What was initially intended to facilitate and lighten the process of parallel data collection and field note sharing evolved as an opportunity to become a group of authors who would at some point publish a book on their autoethnographic research and the stories that emerged during their work as a group.

Strategy 5: Stay pragmatic: Each decision regarding organisation of work was based on pragmatism. For instance, we only used tools that could be easily accessed by each member, such as shared cloud folders to organise documents or etherpads to collaboratively gather meeting minutes. Fostered by this openness, everybody had the chance to learn about and become involved in discussions and current tasks, whenever they wanted. Furthermore, this pragmatism was applied as the group started to realise how differently each member entered into the phase of data collection. Soon, and inevitably, questions of whether one method or frequency was better than the another emerged. These were questions which pragmatism helped to answer. Being pragmatic helped us to focus on the essential aspects of our project and to find solutions to problems according to these aspects. For example, it helped to deal with the fact that some members documented nearly every day, whilst others preferred to collect short notes before combining them in one longer block of text. While some wrote directly in *Mahara*, others used paper-based notebooks. Uploading pictures of written text and arranging additional times to gather and share experiences verbally, whilst the process of written documentation was still ongoing, were two of these solutions. Instead of seeking to unify individual work structures, we found pragmatic ways to ensure that collaboration between the individual researchers could still happen.

Strategy 6: Dare to try: Being part of the AEDiL project required a certain degree of boldness from every member. Some needed to become familiar with autoethnography as a research method, others had to deal with sharing their insecurities with completely unfamiliar colleagues, whilst others were required to become comfortable with the style of writing which autoethnography involves. One way or another, every AEDiL member had to leave her or his (academic) comfort zone. In AEDiL this boldness was fostered by balancing the individual needs of some group members with supporting the ideas of others. Again, offering ways to share struggles and thoughts, thus opening the reflective processes whilst doing autoethnographic research, proved to be helpful.

Even though the context and the origin of AEDiL are highly specific, the above-mentioned principles can be applied to other collaborative research projects in higher education. After all, each project depends on its ability to use and combine the perspectives and competencies of all its members.

Conclusion

It is most likely that autoethnographic research offers valuable insights into how to better understand technology-enhanced teaching and other issues within the HEI context at any time – with or without a simultaneous crisis. Insights into the motivations of and challenges faced by academic teachers and students, educational developers and professionals who enable the transfer of knowledge from academia to society. Insights which might be valuable when seeking to increase the use of digital media in teaching, because they shed light on and help to acknowledge why and how learning can be fostered in online settings.

In AEDiL, we combined the perspectives of a diverse group of professionals to approach these questions and thereby established a productive, synergetic exchange of ideas that we perceived as helpful for ourselves and insightful for our broader scientific communities.

By sharing our practices as a grassroots project in this chapter, we hope to provide a guide for those who wish to apply collaborative autoethnography as a scientific method, but also as a tool for contemplation and resilience. Moreover, we invite higher education researchers to use our findings as means to reflect other empirical data (that were) collected and discussed during the pandemic²⁷, as the rich and context-sensible data provided in our autoethnographic stories complement the findings of quantitative surveys. Combined, both kinds of information enable us to understand more profoundly how the Coronavirus pandemic affected teaching and learning in higher education as well as its agents.

Since the pandemic did not end with one ‘Corona semester’, the members of the project are continuing their observations and expanding their experiences. As of today, we are further analysing the collected data and continue to generate insights based on collaboration and reflective practices. And we are looking forward to sharing them with the world.

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27 E. g. Arndt, Ladwig, and Knutzen, „Zwischen Neugier und Verunsicherung: interne Hochschulbefragungen von Studierenden und Lehrenden im virtuellen Sommersemester 2020: Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse“; Händel et al., „Digital readiness and its effects on higher education students’ socio-emotional perceptions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic“.

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